

Sociolinguistics: Some Theoretical Considerations¹

Myroslava Fabian

Sociolinguistics is a term including the aspects of linguistics applied towards the connections between language and society, and the way we use it in different social situations. It ranges from the study of a wide variety of dialects across a given region down to the analysis between the way men and women speak to one another. Sociolinguistics often shows us the humorous realities of human speech and how a dialect of a given language can often describe the age, sex, and social class of the speaker; it codes the social function of a language. One of the main factors that has led to the growth of sociolinguistic research has been the recognition of the importance of the fact that language is a very variable phenomenon, and this variability may have as much to do with society as with language. A language is not a simple, single code used in the same manner by all people in all situations, and "linguistics has now arrived at a stage where it is both possible and beneficial to begin to tackle this complexity" (Trudgill 1974:32). Sociolinguistics, then, is the study of social life through linguistics. It is the best single label to represent a very wide range of contemporary research at the intersection of linguistics, sociology, social psychology, anthropology, education and human communication studies. It has become an increasingly important and popular field of study, as certain cultures the world over expand their communication base and intergroup and interpersonal relations take on escalating significance. In the normal transfer of information through language, we use language to send vital social messages about who we are, where we come from, and who we associate with. It is often shocking to realize how extensively we may judge a person's background, character, and intentions based simply on the person's language, dialect, or, in some instances, even the choice of words.

Among the main concerns of sociolinguistics one can mention the following ones:

¹ The present publication has been prepared in the framework of the grant *Domus Hungarica Scientiarum et Artium*.

- How do individuals and social groups define themselves in and through language?
- How are forms of speech and patterns of communication distributed across time and space?
- How do communities differ in their “ways of speaking”?
- What are typical patterns in multilingual people’s use of language?
- How is language involved in social conflicts and tensions?
- Why do men and women talk differently?
- Is there a sociolinguistic theory of language use?
- What are the most efficient, and defensible, ways of collecting language data?
- What are the implications of both qualitative and quantitative methods of sociolinguistic research (see, e.g. Coupland and Jaworski 1997)?

Two trends have characterized the development of sociolinguistics over the past several decades. First, the rise of particular specializations within this field has coincided with the emergence of more broadly based social and political issues. Thus, the focus on themes such as language and ethnicity, and language and gender has corresponded with the rise of related issues in society at large. Second, scholars who study the role of language and society have become more and more interested in applying the results of their investigations to the broadly based social, educational, cultural, and probably gave rise to their emergence as sociolinguistic topics to begin with. As a result, sociolinguistics offers a unique opportunity to bring together theory, description, and application in the study of language.

The basic notion underlying sociolinguistics is quite simple: language use symbolically represents fundamental dimensions of social behaviour and human interaction. The notion itself is simple, but the ways in which language reflects behaviour can often be complex and subtle. Furthermore, the relationship between language and society affects a wide range of encounters—from broadly based international relations to narrowly defined interpersonal relationships. In considering language as a social institution, sociolinguists use sociological techniques involving data from questionnaires and summary statistical data, along with information from

direct observation. The study of language in its social context tells us a lot about how we organize our social relationships within a particular community. For instance, addressing a person as "Mrs.", "Ms.", or by a first name is not about simple vocabulary choice, but about the relationship and social position of the speaker and addressee. Similarly, the use of sentence alternatives such as *Just shut up and get on with your work!* *Will you, please, stop talking and get on with your work?* *You'd better get on with your work instead of talking* is not a matter of simple sentence structure. But the choice involves cultural values and norms of politeness, deference, and status. In approaching language as a social activity, it is possible to study the specific patterns or social rules for conducting conversation and discourse. One can describe the rules and peculiarities for both opening and closing a conversation, the proper cases of taking conversational turns, or the ways of telling stories, jokes, etc.

In modern sociolinguistics it is also very important to examine how people manage their language in relation to both their cultural backgrounds and their purposes of interaction. In this respect such problems as how mixed-gender conversations differ from the single-gender ones, how different power relations manifest themselves in language forms, how the children are taught the ways in which language should be used, or how language change occurs and spreads to communities, and, of course, many other questions are of primary importance. In order to solve these problems related to language as social activity, it is advisable to use ethnographic methods. One can attempt to gain an understanding of the values and viewpoints of a community to explain the behaviours and attitudes of its members. All the above mentioned theoretical issues need further investigations, and they are much more complicated than they at first appear. The possible solutions may differ from culture to culture, interacting with many other social characteristics of speakers such as social class, age, sex, context, etc. to varying extents. All the topics of sociolinguistics are not simply linguistic but social ones. As such, any remedy will require changes in both society and language.

References

- Coupland, N. and A. Jaworski. 1997. *Sociolinguistics: A Reader*. N.Y.: St. Martin's Press.
- Fabian, M. 2001. *English: Sociolinguistic and Pragmatic Aspects*. Uzhhorod: Art Line.